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The role of descriptive ethics in the design of research ethics procedures in the social sciences

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Abstract

This paper examines how the growing field of descriptive ethics (the empirical study of ethical beliefs and behaviours) can inform the design of formal research ethics procedures. While social science, particularly in the United Kingdom, has increasingly adopted formalised procedures of ethical review, little attention has been paid to what researchers across different disciplines understand ethical practices and standards to mean, and how social scientists arrive at moral judgements about their work, negotiate dilemmas and resolve competing ethical demands. This paper considers how turning the lens of descriptive ethics onto the practice of social science may interrogate some of these issues. Potential areas for study include how particular disciplines conceive of what it means to be ethical and the negotiation of moral dilemmas when performing research in real-world contexts. Particular attention will be paid to ethnographic and qualitative research within social anthropology and cognate disciplines.

Introduction

In the Anglophone academic world, nearly all research in the social sciences must pass through a process of regulatory approval by an institutionalised ethical review committee. While the ethics of research were once largely a matter of professional judgement, they have become progressively formalised and decisions are increasingly centralised through bodies such as University Research Ethics Committees (URECs). This applies not only to work by senior academic staff, but to student projects at postgraduate and undergraduate levels. Nevertheless, ethical guidelines and processes of ethical review are often treated as little more than a necessary but inconvenient bureaucratic hurdle (Sleeboom-Faulkner and McMurray, 2018) and are regarded as measures which protect the reputation of the institution, while limiting academic autonomy and doing little to protect the rights and interests of research participants (Dingwall, 2012). A common complaint is that overly formalised and centralised guidelines and processes do not consider the diversity of forms of inquiry and the way academics in different fields have developed their own standards of ethics (ibid.).

Following the suggestions of previous commentators (Sleeboom-Faulkner et al., 2017), this paper argues that formalised research ethics in the social sciences need to be redesigned to account for the specificities of academic fields, their conceptions of what it means to be ethical, and the way researchers take decisions and negotiate dilemmas. Meanwhile, during the last fifteen years, research has flourished in social science on descriptive ethics: the empirical study of ethical beliefs and behaviours (Sommers, 2016). Yet there has not been any attempt to apply this body of work to the design of research ethics procedures. This paper will outline the main areas of theory and methodological approaches that have emerged in descriptive ethics and how these could generate data to address the current weaknesses of formal research ethics. However, before doing so, it will delineate some key problems with the formalisation of research ethics, paying close attention to academia in the anglophone world and the sort of ethnographic and qualitative research performed in social anthropology and cognate disciplines, such as human geography and qualitative sociology.

The formalisation of research ethics

While some of the core principles referred to in ethical review, such as confidentiality, informed consent and the protection of informants, have been recognised by ethnographic researchers since the early 20th century (Whyte, 1993), the widespread adoption of centralised systems of ethical review across all disciplines in the social sciences has been a relatively recent phenomenon (Dingwall, 2012). This has involved tacitly adopting a model of research on human subjects from the biomedical sciences, where such procedures were originally developed (Halpern, 2004). The formalisation of research ethics has been largely driven by the demands of research councils, such as the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the need for institutional risk and reputational management, and the rise of bureaucratic managerialism and corporatism in Higher Education (Hedgecoe, 2008).

While anthropologists, sociologists and social geographers, whose work relies on qualitative and ethnographic studies, have their own professional guidelines and internal debates on the ethics of research, they have had little influence over the development of this process (Sleeboom-Faulkner et al., 2017). They have engaged in nuanced discussions regarding the obligations of researchers to their informants, sensitivity to cultural norms and values, and the ethical nature and value of research on human participants (Miller, 2016). Nevertheless, neither the explicitly stated or implicit ethical standards of many of these fields are reflected in formal processes of informed consent, research design and institutional permissions.

Moreover, neither do such formal processes adequately consider the contexts in which researchers make ethical judgements in the course of qualitative and ethnographic investigation. Anyone who has carried out long-term fieldwork will recognise that consent is a process of continual negotiation, which involves a reflexive understanding of the developing relationship between the researcher and participants (Thorne, 1980). Ethnography is a largely unplanned and open-ended process which involves an implicit appreciation of responsibilities towards research participants during and after the initial study. Fieldworkers will often not only explain their research in detail to those they work with but will involve them in the design of questions and methodologies. It is typical to encounter unexpected ethical dilemmas which involve competing loyalties to participants and professional and legal standards, or between the moral principles of the fieldworker's own culture and the group or society they are studying. The notion of cultural relativism in social anthropology refers not only to the cultivation of tolerance and respect for the perspectives and values of the group the ethnographer studies, but the imperative that research must be carried out in accordance with these values and ways of life, to be genuinely ethical and to avoid causing harm (Herskovits, 1958).

The standard research model implicit in formalised ethical review is a procedural study which focuses on contractual rights and obligations of informed consent (Halpern, 2004). Consequently, researchers in many areas of the social sciences find themselves involved in time-consuming bureaucratic procedures which have little to do with the complex realities of their research. While the attitude of many social scientists in fields such as anthropology is that ethical review is an irrelevant annoyance (Sleeboom-Faulkner and McMurray, 2018), some are concerned that among early career researchers, it can produce misplaced confidence and cultivated ignorance in regard to the real ethical issues to be encountered (*ibid.*). Therefore, rather than making the practice of research more ethical, the rise of formalised institutional ethical review may limit the ability of researchers to effectively negotiate the complex moral situations they face in the real world.

The study of ethics

The last fifteen years have seen the widespread emergence of research within the social sciences on descriptive ethics (Sommers, 2016). This is an interdisciplinary field which attempts to understand the nature of human moral reasoning, processes of learning, reflection and conflict, and the interaction between social structure and ethics. This includes work in 'experimental philosophy' and research in the cognitive sciences that investigates processes of moral reasoning and the proximate psychological mechanisms responsible for them (Appiah, 2009), alongside studies in anthropology that examine the social basis of human ethical life (Laidlaw, 2014).

What is widely referred to as the 'ethical turn' in anthropology has focused on investigating the social processes through which morality is reproduced, assimilated and negotiated. Some figures within this subfield (Mattingly and Throop, 2018) have suggested that ethics are constituted by the social practices which form part of a cultural tradition. This is made up of a community of teachers and learners, in which persons occupy both roles at different points in their life cycle. As individuals are taught to perform practices and grow in skill, they also understand the internal goods and values of social practices, which can only be apprehended through participation in them. An analogy could be made to learning a game such as chess, in which there exist external goods or rewards, such as praise or money, and the internal goods that come with developing greater skill at and understanding of the game itself. In this way, it is possible to learn the often implicit and embodied skills and knowledge through which someone can be a virtuous person and exercise moral judgement within the cultural tradition of their community. This view highlights the value of the ethnographic method for studying ethics, as it is only through observation and participation in social practices that it is possible to comprehend the complex web of understandings which shape the form and content of moral thought and belief.

Work in psychology and neuroscience on moral reasoning overlaps substantially with the field of experimental moral philosophy, which tests whether philosophical conceptual claims about moral judgement and the intuitive self-evidence of ethical propositions are reflected in the thoughts and beliefs of ordinary people (Sommers, 2016). This has explored how the ways individuals respond to moral dilemmas reveal the cognitive processes which underly ethical judgement and decision-making (Greene et al., 2001) and the divergence between explicit normative standards and theories and people's actual behaviour (Knobe, 2006). These studies use experimental tests and measures to investigate the processes involved in moral cognition and the biological mechanisms which underly them, illustrating how moral judgements are often the result of automatic mental processes, shaped by the particular culture an individual belongs to and influenced by environmental cues (Graham et al., 2013). Through doing so, they highlight the limitations imposed on objective ethical judgement by the partial and culturally and situationally determined nature of moral thought.

Studying the ethics of research

This paper has argued that formal research ethics procedures fail to account for the specificities of research in many social science fields, particularly the sort of qualitative work performed in social anthropology and cognate disciplines. Moreover, such procedures have not incorporated the ethical standards of academic fields which are relevant to judging the correct course of action in particular contexts, such as ethnographic observation or qualitative interviewing. While this paper can only offer a schematic outline of how the insights and methodological tools provided by work in descriptive ethics can be applied to the design of formal research ethics procedures, this section delineates two potential avenues for collaboration. The first of these concerns the task of providing an explicit systematisation of the ethics of an academic discipline. Doing so would mean that applications for ethical clearance would be based on a relevant and nuanced understanding of the nature of research within a field and the responsibilities of the investigator to participants. The second relates to understanding the contexts in which researchers make decisions and the factors which constrain and influence their judgements. This could be applied to the design of procedures which permit researchers to effectively navigate the ethical dilemmas they encounter, particularly during ethnographic investigation.

If what is ethical for a community is constituted by the internal goods of practices which can only be comprehended through participation in them, the same is true for academic disciplines which practise particular forms of research. Much of what is considered ethical by scholars within a field, including the value of research as an activity, results from various unspoken assumptions and expectations into which they are socialised concerning the goals of the discipline, the role of the researcher and their obligations. The gulf between formalised research ethics procedures and the widely understood but implicit ethical standards shared by researchers explains the widespread attitude of frustration and dismissiveness towards ethical review (Dingwall, 2012). For example, anthropological research can be understood as a practice whose internal goods include the production of a type of knowledge which involves understanding the perspectives of other people (Astuti and Bloch, 2012). Implicit within this is the conception that research is a reflexive and dialogical process, negotiated through the development of shared understanding and application of the ethical standards of those studied. The biomedical research model, implicit in formal ethical review (Halpern, 2004), which treats participants as passive subjects, not only does not reflect the practical realities of other types of human research, but is antithetical to the tacit ethical standards of anthropology and cognate disciplines. When faced with the demand to elicit 'informed consent' from 'research subjects', ethnographers may instinctively recoil at the way such language reduces human beings to the inactive object of a scientised gaze.

To understand the ethical standards of a field, it is therefore not only necessary to attend to what researchers within it write or say, but to know how these are constituted by the internal goods of their research practices. One of the distinguishing features of the ethnographic method is to render explicit the unspoken beliefs and concepts through which individuals navigate their sociocultural environments, by undergoing and documenting what can be described as an apprenticeship, to become a culturally competent member of a social group (Astuti and Bloch, 2012). Carrying out ethnographic observation within a research discipline can therefore render explicit the previously unarticulated ethical standards shared by members of the field, so that these may be applied to the formulation of research ethics procedures which are meaningful to them. For example, in anthropology this could include replacing the use of standardised informed consent with protocols on how to establish shared trust and negotiate access to communities via their own principles and procedures.

If the objectivity of moral judgement is affected by the limitations of cognitive processes and the influence of situational and cultural factors, this is no less true of the judgements and decisions made by researchers. Outside of the sorts of studies carried out in psychology, in which detailed protocols are devised in advance of formal experiments, the reality of most research in the social sciences is that improvised ethical decisions must be made during the course of a study. For example, a researcher may have to make spontaneous decisions about whether to directly interfere in the life of a community or to conceal sensitive information about themselves. Work in descriptive ethics cannot determine what the solution is to such dilemmas, but it can provide insight into how to navigate them.

Experimental research which explores responses to moral dilemmas suggests that moral reasoning is often an automatic and intuitive cognitive process which can lead to errors in judgement. Moral judgements, like other forms of social cognition (Kahneman and Tversky, 2003), are often made through simple heuristics which provide quick and automatic evaluations (Sunstein, 2003). While this is often useful, it can lead to absurd decisions. For example, people may be motivated to devote tremendous resources on saving the life of one individual, while being relatively indifferent to the suffering of many others, given the way our moral heuristics make some cases more salient (*ibid.*). Research has identified the factors which produce automatic moral reasoning processes, as opposed to more conscious forms of deliberation, including emotionally ‘triggering’ factors, time pressure and cognitive overload (Greene et al., 2001). Meanwhile, processes of enculturation can shape the form of intuitive moral judgements, leading to a breakdown in mutual understanding between individuals from different backgrounds (Haidt, 2012).

Existing data in this area and new research could be applied to understanding the limitations placed on researchers’ abilities to make sound moral judgements during cognitively demanding and pressured situations, such as interviewing or ethnography. These data could be used to design training, which includes role playing of different scenarios, to help researchers negotiate ethically demanding situations which may occur in the course of their work and learn how their judgement may be negatively affected. For example, a researcher may become involved with an internal dispute among a community they are working in and be asked to choose a side. Researchers can identify in advance the factors which trigger automatic moral judgments and learn how to distance themselves from a situation to be able to make better decisions. Meanwhile, collecting data on the implicit moral attitudes of researchers can indicate the nature of cultural bias within different fields, meaning that practitioners of the discipline are more likely to make certain types of intuitive moral judgement (Haidt, 2012). This would allow researchers to better identify what is partial in their moral attitudes, permitting them to appreciate the ethical perspectives of research participants.

Conclusion

While taking a critical view of the way formalised ethics procedures have been implemented, this paper does not suggest they be abandoned in favour of a return to professional judgement on the part of individuals and their peers. However, formalised procedures should be informed by evidence and the application of empirical studies. The examples given in the preceding section are meant only to provide a schematic outline of some of the potential avenues for applying empirical research on ethics to the ethics of research. However, even these examples suggest the need for substantial changes to the design of research ethics procedures.

For example, replacing the highly general guidance and ethical review procedures on research practices and informed consent with protocols that incorporate the specific ethical standards of different fields would require delegating decision-making and oversight from university-wide ethics committees, such as URECs, to specialised subcommittees at the departmental level. Meanwhile, implementing specialised training to address the sorts of real-world ethical decisions researchers are faced with would require formally recognising that much research with human participants involves *ad hoc* practical and moral judgements. Whether there exists the realistic possibility that such changes could be effected, given the role of formalised research ethics in the maintenance of bureaucratic control over academic work and institutional reputational management (Dingwall, 2012), is beyond the remit of this brief contribution. What it suggests is the need for further work in this area and a sustained project of collaboration between researchers across different fields.

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